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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001040

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SUBJECT: BAHRAINIS REACT TO AL ZARQAWI'S DEATH

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶1. (C) Privately, all Bahrainis we have been in touch with, whether Sunni or Shi'a, have expressed satisfaction with the death of Al Zarqawi. Public reactions have broken down along mostly sectarian lines. Shi'a Bahrainis, who represent some 70 percent of the country's citizens, expressed their happiness by sending celebratory cell phone text messages to friends and distributing sweets to neighbors and colleagues. Although there was little said in Friday prayer sermons about Al Zarqawi, perhaps because of the proximity between the announcement of his death and the sermons, there were some messages from Shi'a clerics in mosques and ma'atams (Shi'a community centers) thanking God for ending his life. Newspaper columns were more mixed, with some critical articles from Sunni columnists who support the Iraqi insurgency. End Summary.

Satisfaction the Terrorist is Gone

¶2. (C) All Bahrainis we spoke with have reacted with varying degrees of satisfaction to the death of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi. Shi'as have been jubilant and most Sunnis are pleased that a man widely viewed as a terrorist and criminal who hijacked their sect is gone. There is a small fringe segment of the Sunni population sympathetic to Al Qaida, but they have been silent on Al Zarqawi's death thus far. Government officials have privately expressed their appreciation for the U.S. strike on Al Zarqawi but the GOB has not commented officially on the matter.

¶3. (C) Public reaction to the news has largely broken down along sectarian lines. Shi'as, who comprise some 70 percent of the country's citizens, have expressed their happiness. Some Sunni columnists who support the Iraqi insurgency have written articles critical of the U.S. attack on Al Zarqawi but refrain from praising him, focusing instead on their support for the insurgency. Both the Arabic and English press carried factual news stories of the event and Iraqi/coalition press conferences.

Shi'as Celebrate

¶4. (C) Several Embassy staff received congratulatory phone calls and text messages on June 8 as the news began to spread. Poloff heard anecdotes of residents of Shi'a villages distributing sweets and congratulating one another that Al Zarqawi was dead. There were also reports of retail

store owners offering candy, tea and coffee to their customers, and colleagues in workplaces as diverse as national phone company Batelco and local public schools sharing sweets together.

¶5. (C) Central Municipal Council member Redha Humaidan (Shi'a) told Emboff, "Since Al Zarqawi was responsible for the killing of hundreds of Iraqi civilians and the destruction of mosques and community centers, his death will decrease the suffering of Iraqis. We hope that stability in Iraq will enable Iraq's elected parliament to speed up political and economic progress. We also hope that his death encourages other Iraqis supporting Al Zarqawi's ideology to stop conducting terrorist acts and to join the political process."

¶6. (C) Leading Shi'a opposition society Al Wifaq Shura (Consultative) council member Nizar Al Qari told Poloff that 50-100 residents of Sitra, a Shi'a area, held a gathering in the street similar to a "zeffah," an event held for grooms prior to a wedding. The residents gathered in a circle and chanted slogans praising Al Zarqawi's death. Al Qari also said that several mosques distributed candy to worshippers. In one of the mosques, a secondary imam who speaks between prayer times said, "We thank God that the enemy of the "marjaie" (referring to Ayatollah Sistani) is now dead."

Focus on Damage Done to Islam

¶7. (C) A Shi'a source close to the Embassy told of a June 8 gathering at a ma'atam at which a cleric said that the violent death of Al Zarqawi illustrates what happens to those

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who advocate violence and terrorism. Al Zarqawi gave a false and damaging view of Islam and Muslims. The cleric reportedly said that even though Al Zarqawi was responsible for the deaths of a large number of Shi'a Iraqis, his words and actions should be even more insulting and offensive to Sunnis since he considered himself to be their representative.

¶8. (C) Another Shi'a contact told us, "Al Zarqawi was a criminal who misrepresented Islam. We support the unity of Iraq and think Al Zarqawi's death will lead to greater unity. We look forward to the destruction of all terrorists, not only in Iraq, but in the whole region. I have spoken to many Sunni and Shi'a in Bahrain and all expressed their satisfaction over the death of Al Zarqawi." He added that he saw and heard prominent Shi'a cleric Abdulla Al Ghuraifi congratulating people attending prayers June 8 before he spoke at the gathering.

Columnists Speak Out

¶9. (U) Comments from editorials varied in their reactions to Al Zarqawi's demise. Ahmed Al Boosta in liberal Al Waqt and Qassem Hussain in the independent Al Wasat praised the killing of Al Zarqawi. They criticized Ba'athists in Bahrain who live in a world of conspiracy theories who spread claim that Al Zarqawi never existed or that he was only a creation of American propaganda.

¶10. PanArabist Akhbar Al Khaleej's columnists used the subject of Al Zarqawi's death as a springboard to promote their support for the Iraqi insurgency. Abulla Al Ayoobi wrote that the U.S. can take credit for the killing of Al Zarqawi, but the real winner is the genuine Iraqi resistance, whose reputation had been sullied by Al Zarqawi's indiscriminate crimes against Iraqi civilians. "Al Zarqawi's actions are clearly terrorism, having no other purpose than to shed blood." Sayed Zahra argued that "it is not heroic to launch air strikes on a house. The U.S. feels that the

killing of Al Zarqawi will be the straw that will save it from drowning in the Iraqi quagmire. His killing will lead to more air strikes and the killing of more innocent civilians."

¶11. (U) Hafedh Al Shaikh, also from Akhbar Al Khaleej, warns the U.S. and its "Shi'a allies in Iraq" not to celebrate too much because Al Zarqawi's death only marks the end of one chapter in the book on the Iraqi resistance. He claims that Al Zarqawi's ideology is to blame for alienating the Shi'a and a large portion of the Sunnis in Iraq. "Now the nail and hammer are in the hands of the Shi'a and the government to try to bridge the sectarian gap created by those who believe the takfeeri ideology. But this won't happen unless the Shi'a abandon their loyalty and alliance with the Safawis (Iranians), who hold beliefs similar to the takfeeris and who dominate the Ministry of Interior and the death squads."

Comment

¶12. (C) Our Bahraini contacts have expressed universal support for Al Zarqawi's demise. While there is a fringe element among Bahrain's Sunni society that is sympathetic to Al Qaida, this group has been silent on Al Zarqawi's death. Even the most outspoken partisans of the Iraqi insurgency, the pan-Arabists and unreconstructed Ba'athists at Akhbar Al Khaleej, refrain from supporting Al Zarqawi, focusing instead on the insurgency. More responsible members of Bahraini society are likely breathing a sigh of relief that Al Zarqawi has been removed from the scene. His incitement of sectarian tensions in Iraq echoed within Bahraini society, albeit in a diminished way. As Bahraini leaders try to deal with their own local issues with sectarian overtones - elections, employment, housing, education - they are no doubt hoping the spillover effect from Iraq becomes less intense.

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